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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IR](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIA-IRAN RELATIONS FLOURISHING; IS FURTHER
IMPROVEMENT INEVITABLE?

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons
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[1](#)1. (C) Summary: By official Syrian accounts, the country's relationship with Iran has flourished since the January visit of Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Damascus. Embassy contacts largely dismiss the immediate economic benefit of increased ties, but note that the two countries have formed several committees to deal with political issues and strengthen the bilateral relationship. They also underscore the SARG's success in using Iran to strengthen its political position in light of increasing U.S. pressure to isolate Syria. The SARG is also using the relationship with Iran to heighten Syria's regional influence, contacts assert. Several contacts insisted that if the U.S. would engage with Syria, the relationship with Iran would atrophy quickly, since the SARG would have a much better chance of attaining a key objective with the return of the Golan via negotiations sponsored by the U.S. Despite the current flourishing of relations between Syria and Iran, there may be areas where Syrian and Iranian interests potentially diverge. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) By official Syrian accounts, the country's relationship with Iran has flourished since the January 19-20 visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Damascus. A search of official Syrian media since the Ahmadinejad visit produced a list of headlines highlighting political, economic and cultural exchanges, including the Iranian VP's February visit to Damascus as head of his side's representation of the Syrian-Iranian Higher Economic Commission and the March visit to Tehran by Syrian Assistant FM (the number three official at the Foreign Ministry) Ahmad Arnous.

[1](#)3. (C) Contacts have also recently told us about the reported (but unconfirmed) formation of three Syrian-Iranian committees: one to handle the financing of arms for Syria, particularly given the SARG's inability to come up with ready cash for military purchases from governments such as Russia; the second to train Syrians in the use and refurbishment of weapons, particularly Russian ones; and the third to handle a request by the Iranians to inspect Russian-made missiles in Syria's possession.

[1](#)4. (C) Embassy contacts have not seen an immediate economic benefit for Syria in the increasing ties (reftel A), but analysts underscore political advantages for the regime domestically and abroad. First, Syria has used its burgeoning alliance with Iran to undermine the perception of

the international isolation of Syria, contacts say. Second, Iran has indirectly helped ensure the Syrian regime's No. 1 domestic goal, which is survival, a point made by Al-Hayat correspondent Ibrahim Hamidi to visiting Syria Desk Officer Sita Sonty. Iran's long-standing support for Syria's special ally in Lebanon, Hizballah, has helped Syria reassert its influence there, after withdrawing its troops in April 2005. Iran's efforts in Iraq, while more sustained and nuanced than the SARG's, have mirrored SARG efforts to prevent any quick realization of an American "project" for Iraqi democratization and stability. Imagine if Lebanon and Iraq had already undergone democratic elections and a quick, smooth transition to Western-style democracy, leaving Syria in the middle, Hamidi said. The Syrian regime would have collapsed under the political pressure, he asserted.

15. (C) Domestically, the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad is stronger than ever, but it is using Iran to heighten Syria's regional profile and influence, according to contacts. French DCM Nicholas Suran made a similar point with Desk Officer Sonty, citing Syria's successful use of Iran to force Saudi re-engagement, despite Saudi anger over the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri. When it became clear that Syria and Iran were getting closer, the Saudis reached out to the Syrians with an offer to help them patch up the SARG's relations with Lebanon, the DCM said. Syrian analyst Samir al-Taki confirmed that Syria would like to serve as a key intermediary between Shiite Iran and Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Egypt. "In the past, Syria has served as a release valve at the intersection of Saudi-Egypt tensions with Iran," he said. Advocates of a new, pro-Iran policy want Syria to resume that role, he added. Separately, as reported in Reftel B, strengthened Syria-Iran ties may have also contributed to increased Spanish interest in engagement with the SARG.

16. (C) Contacts disagree over the extent to which the Syria-Iran relationship is tactical or strategic. This is not just a tactical relationship, but a 20-year marriage that will last, says an Egyptian diplomat. Others such as foreign policy analyst Marwan Kabalan disagree, insisting that while Iran is relying on Syria to expand its long-term strategic influence in the region, the SARG is using Iran (as it uses Hizballah) primarily as tactical leverage to achieve U.S. engagement leading to a Middle East peace agreement, which would include the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. Once there is such a deal, Iran's political usefulness to the SARG diminishes and the two countries' enormous religious and sectarian differences have room to emerge, Kabalan asserted. Foreign affairs analyst Imad Shuebi, who speaks regularly with inner circle members of the regime, made similar points in his meeting with the Desk Officer. Shuebi maintained that, if the U.S. made some effort to maintain decent relations with Syria, offering the opportunity for each side to calculate rationally and preserve its regional interests, Syria would not pursue close relations with Iran. As it is, at the same time that the U.S. ignores any Syrian interests, issuing instead endless lists of demands for Syrian action, the U.S. maintains extremely close relations with Syria's No. 1 "enemy" Israel, Shuebi said. The Iranians, on the other hand, "help us in the main regional struggle against Israel and help us at a time of great pressure from the U.S., as we attempt to get back our rights, our land," Shuebi said. He added that if the U.S. would show more balance and broker negotiations that could lead to peace between Syria and Israel, Syria would not need Iran's support and would drift into a more essentially pro-Western, pro-U.S. orbit. Syria is also pursuing an enhanced relationship with Iran because Iran is supportive of Syrian efforts to play an active regional role, while the U.S. wants to prevent Syria from having any regional influence, Shuebi said.

17. (C) Despite Egyptian discomfort over strengthened Syria-Iran ties, the Egyptians do not have a set of "red lines" specifically linked to that relationship, an Egyptian diplomat stated. The Egyptians view with dismay what they see as Iranian control of Iraq and increased influence in Damascus, but the Egyptian Government's main goal is to avoid

further instability, the diplomat said.

18. (C) Comment: Although relations between the countries are flourishing at present, there appear to be areas where Syrian and Iranian interests potentially diverge. The two sides' attitudes toward Hizballah are a case in point. Syria approaches the Hizballah relationship tactically, and, if it obtained a peace deal returning the Golan, it would likely be willing to cut off its support for Hizballah. Iran has no such land grievance with Israel that could be addressed by negotiations and diplomatic give-and-take. Rather, it needs Hizballah to project its influence in the Arab Middle East and no confluence of developments is likely to change those calculations or lead Iran to re-evaluate its support for Hizballah. Iranian and Syrian interests in Iraq also seem to diverge in critical ways despite their shared interests in trying to block any perceived "American success" there. Of course, as analysts here make clear, there are also interests that bind the two countries. In the end, those interests may predominate. It is not, however, at least at this juncture, a relationship without some inherent internal tensions that might be exploited to prevent it from emerging as a long-term strategic threat.

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